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ABSTRACT

A national, nongovernmental accreditation system is the key to ensuring that education remains fundamentally sound, responsible, responsive, and effective, thereby providing public confidence in the integrity and quality of educational institutions and programs. The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) policy on the rights and responsibilities of accrediting bodies and institutions in this process is explained. Preconditions are that the institutions/programs and accrediting bodies are partners in the voluntary evaluation, and there is a mutual commitment among institutions/programs and accrediting bodies to candor, cooperation, integrity, trust, confidence, voluntary self-regulation, and assessment of educational quality. The policy statement looks at: development and promulgation of standards (with institutions/programs and accrediting bodies having the responsibility to involve broad participation of affected constituencies in developing standards and policies, develop consistent and flexible policies and standards, and conduct periodic review); and five stages of accreditation actions or process and concomitant statements of rights and responsibilities (basic procedures, information requested and supplied, site visit and review, decision, and follow-up). (SM)

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POLICY
STATEMENT ON

Rights and Responsibilities of Accrediting Bodies and Institutions in the Accrediting Process

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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April, 1985

COUNCIL ON POSTSECONDARY ACCREDITATION

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PREFACE

American postsecondary education reflects a diverse, semi-autonomous and independent composite of institutions and programs. In the diversity of the system lies its strength. By design, postsecondary education functions with considerable latitude and few restrictions. Compared with most other countries, there has been a remarkable degree of freedom from government regulation and intrusion. Accreditation serves as the balance between institutional autonomy, independence and freedom and the institution's or program's responsibilities to students, the public, the profession and various levels of governments. As a self-regulatory process, voluntary accreditation includes certain rights and responsibilities for both institutions/programs and accrediting bodies. Coupled with institutional or programmatic rights and responsibilities are rights and responsibilities of accreditation that keep such institutions and programs responsive and ensure that they provide quality education. The national, nongovernmental accreditation system is the key in ensuring that education remains fundamentally sound, responsible, responsive and effective, thereby providing public confidence in the integrity and quality of educational institutions and programs.

PRECONDITIONS

A statement related to rights and responsibilities of institutions/programs and accrediting bodies is rooted in general assumptions:

1. That the institutions/programs and accrediting bodies are partners in the system of voluntary nongovernmental evaluation.
2. That there is a mutual commitment among institutions/programs and accrediting bodies to:
   a. Voluntary self-regulation,
   b. Assessment and enhancement of educational quality,
   c. Candor,
   d. Cooperation,
   e. Integrity, and
   f. Confidence and trust.

Given these preconditions there are certain reciprocal institutional/programmatic and accrediting body rights and responsibilities that relate directly: (1) to the development and promulgation of accreditation standards and (2) to the various stages of the accrediting process.

STATEMENT

A. Development and Promulgation of Standards

Institutions/programs and accrediting bodies, in cooperation with each other, have the responsibility to:

1. Involve broad participation of affected constituencies in the development and acceptance of standards and policies.
2. Develop standards and policies which:
   a. Are consistent with the purposes of accreditation,
   b. Are sufficiently flexible to allow diversity and effective program development,
   c. Allow and encourage institutional/programmatic freedom and autonomy, and
   d. Allow the institution/program to exercise its rights within a reasonable set of parameters relevant to the quality of education and, in professional fields, to prepare individuals effectively for practice in the profession.
3. Conduct periodic reviews of the standards.

B. Five Stages of Accreditation Actions or Process and Concomitant Statements of Rights and Responsibilities

The five process stages and concomitant statements of rights and responsibilities which follow are based on the standards and procedures currently utilized by COPA recognized accrediting bodies. Each declarative statement implies a reciprocal relationship of rights and responsibilities.

Stage 1: Basic Procedures

a. The institution/program develops and implements an institutional policy for seeking, securing and maintaining accredited status with institutional or specialized accrediting bodies.

b. The institution/program develops an effective mechanism to ensure the internal coordination of accrediting activities.

c. In corresponding with representatives on campus, the accrediting body routinely provides copies to the chief executive and, where appropriate, the chief academic officer and/or director of the program.

d. The accrediting body refrains from advertising or soliciting applications for accreditation from institutions/programs.

Stage 2: Information Requested and Supplied
(Including the self-study)

a. The institution/program determines how it will conduct its self-study and the accrediting body specifies the items to be addressed in the report.

b. The accrediting body requires only information that is relevant to accrediting standards and policies, and, whenever possible, this information will be coordinated with information requested by other accrediting bodies.

c. The institution/program involves broad and appropriate constituent groups in the preparation and process of self-study.

d. The institution/program discloses to the accrediting body that information which is required to carry out the accrediting body's evaluation and accrediting functions (with due regard to individual privacy).

e. The accrediting body and institution/program respect the confidentiality of information required and evaluated in the accrediting process.

Stage 3: The Site Visit and Review

a. When requested by the institution/program, the accrediting body (in consultation with the institution/program and when feasible) conducts joint, concurrent, coordinated, consolidated or phased visits.

b. The accrediting body, in consultation with the institution/program, selects site visitors who are:
   1) Competent by virtue of experience, training and orientation,
   2) Sensitive to the uniqueness of the institution and/or program, and
   3) Impartial, objective and without conflict of interest.

c. The accrediting body ensures that the composition, team size and length of the visit are:
   1) Determined in consultation with the institution/program,
   2) Determined with regard to the size and complexity of the institution/program, and
   3) Most appropriate to accomplish the objectives of the visit.

d. The institution/program provides maximum opportunity for communication with all relevant constituencies.

e. The accrediting body communicates its findings derived from the site visit to the institution/program.

f. The accrediting body ensures that the report identifies and distinguishes clearly between statements directly related to quality-assessment and those representing suggestions for quality-improvement.

g. The accrediting body provides the chief executive officer of the institution (and the chief academic officer and/or the director of the program) with an opportunity to comment on the written report of the visiting team and to file supplemental materials pertinent to the facts and conclusions therein before the accrediting body takes action on the report.

Stage 4: The Decision
(Including commission action, conveyance of action, appeal and public announcement of action)

a. The accrediting body permits the withdrawal of a request for any status of accreditation at any time prior to the decision on that request.

b. The accrediting body makes decisions solely on the basis of published standards, policies and procedures using information available and made known to the institution/program.

c. The accrediting body avoids conflicts of interest in the decision making process.

d. The accrediting body ensures the confidentiality of those deliberations in which accrediting decisions are made, but due process will be observed in all deliberations.

e. The accrediting body notifies institutions and programs promptly in writing of accrediting decisions, giving reasons for the actions.

f. The accrediting body ensures that the communication of the final accrediting decision, i.e., the notification letter and/or final report, identifies and clearly distinguishes between statements directly related to quality-assessment and those representing suggestions for quality-improvement.

g. The institution/program has a right to appeal an accrediting decision in accordance with the policies of the accrediting body, and to maintain its accredited status during the appeal.

h. The accrediting body publishes accrediting decisions, both affirmative and negative, except for initial denial which need not be made public.

i. The accrediting body maintains the confidentiality of the final report but it may request that corrective action be taken if an institution/program releases information misrepresenting or distorting any accreditation action taken by the body or the status of affiliation with the accrediting body. If the institution/program is not prompt in taking corrective action, the accrediting body may further release a public statement providing the correct information.

Stage 5: Follow-Up
(Including interim reports and reapplication)

a. The accrediting body can request periodic reports, special reports, and consultative activities relevant to the institution's/program's accreditation status.

b. The accrediting body provides written notice to the institution/program of the action taken in relation to a special report or visit.

c. Accrediting bodies may request the reevaluation of an institution/program at any time for cause.

d. The institution/program has an obligation to inform the accrediting body of any substantive changes.

e. The institution/program has a right to have pertinent information provided concerning reapplication requirements for accreditation under the terms and conditions specified by the accrediting body.

f. Separate from the accrediting process leading to a decision on accredited status, the accrediting body assists and stimulates improvement of the educational effectiveness of an institution/program, and to this end makes provision for appropriate assistance.

Adopted by the COPA Board April 19, 1985

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) is a nongovernmental organization intended to foster and facilitate the role of member accrediting bodies in promoting and ensuring the quality and diversity of American postsecondary education.

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